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SOME AMBIGUITIES IN "DEMOCRACY"

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Sir John Seeley once remarked about the word "liberty" that a political speaker must use it at least once in each address, because otherwise the audience would not know when to applaud. A different stimulant for the lethargic listener is now employed. A different talisman serves the purpose of platform conjuring. "Democracy" bids fair to succeed to the almost vacant place of "liberty" as the most hackneyed, the most ill-defined, and hence the most meaningless term of public debate. The less familiar watchwords at least commit one to something. But an election candidate in search of an elastic label beneath which any attitude under the sun may find shelter had best ring the changes upon "democratic."

One reason why this epithet has come to mean so little is that we have struggled to make it mean so much. The Greeks, who invented it, were not bothered with its present ambiguities, for they knew what they had chosen it to stand for, and they adhered to this. But we of the modern age, in our zeal to have a single word as the most convenient weapon to brandish, have forced into this word *every* aim which our own side has promoted and the other side has opposed in the great conflict of ideals. To prove a thing evil we assume as sufficient that we should prove it undemocratic. In defending what has been so stigmatized we feel that the case is

hopeless if we cannot remove this initial objection, so that by hook or by crook, though we should burst the English language in our effort, we must prove the damnatory adjective to have been misapplied. If we want to reform anything, we place our chief reliance on the argument that our plan will still further democratize what we have set out to mend. Thus we have become almost afraid even to raise the question whether this purpose in statecraft is not, like all other purposes, a thing of limited scope, whose special advantage may be missed by our having too much of it not less surely than by our having too little. Our experience of the Bolsheviki has indeed opened the eyes of a few. But even this is being explained away. Enthusiasts are emphasizing the difference between "true" and "false" democracy, just as they used to split hairs about "liberty" and "license," for they are pledged to exhibit the system they idealize as free from all imperfections whatever. They therefore contend that, while its plausible counterfeit may be bad, the real brand will bring unmixed blessings. It is thus spoken of as if it were not merely good government, not merely the best government, but the just government made perfect, and the implication is that if we seek democracy all other things will be added unto us. Yet it is surely plain that such unqualified panegyric can be deserved by no human arrangement. As Dr. P. T. Forsyth would say, the purpose of the universe is not definable in a formula which undergraduates can easily remember.

How many senses of this term can we distinguish in current usage? At least three. They are not, indeed, independent senses, and we may find that they rest on a common basis of principle. But they are sufficiently different to make it worth while for us to distinguish them.

a) The first is the sense of *equality*. When Martin Chuzzlewit landed in New York one of the earliest things impressed upon him was that no such relation as "master and servant" was there recognized. A mere matter of names is, of course, of little importance. What is important is the determination in the New World, both in the United States and in Canada, to allow nothing that has the shape of birth privilege, and to insist as far as possible that all men shall have the same civic opportunity. One saw an example

of this lately in Canada when the rumor of a large consignment of decorative titles, some of them transmissible from father to son, called forth in the House of Commons a very fierce and probably a very decisive protest. Whatever else the man in the street means when he calls himself democratic, he at least means to avow a mood of permanent irritability toward all social or caste arrogance. But this meaning is negative rather than positive. It states a position in terms not of what one approves but of what one condemns.

b) Again, a democratic order is thought of as one in which individual preferences must yield to the collective will. What the nation has clearly purposed each citizen is called upon to promote. Majority rule means minority submissiveness. Thus a bill may be opposed at every stage in the American Congress by every constitutional weapon, but once it has become the law of the land it is undemocratic to obstruct the enforcement. Words and acts that were permissible before the entry of the United States into the war became treason to the American democracy the moment that step had been taken. The draft law ceased to be a legitimate subject for debate as soon as it had been signed by the President, for to question its propriety was to imperil its effectiveness. It is but the extreme statement of this principle when one hears the jest that all sides in a presidential election are expected when the result is known to agree that the best man has been chosen. Imbued with this spirit we hear with amazement of a Home-Rule Act for Ireland, duly passed after ample discussion in the Imperial Parliament, yet allowed to remain a dead letter because three or four counties have sworn to resist it unto blood. For the insurgent few declare in the same breath that they look upon the wisdom of king, lords, and commons as the one authority which should claim their allegiance! Many of us feel that the deplorable resolve of other Irish counties to resist unto blood this effort at defrauding them of their hard-won constitutional gain was to be expected under the circumstances. For we see "Ulster" and Sinn Fein as alike rebels against democracy.

c) But when we speak of the war as a democratic crusade, and as an effort to "make the world safe for democracy," it is clear that neither of the foregoing senses can be intended. What, for

example, is meant by the view that Germany must be "democratized"? None of us cared with what degree of servility the Germans might choose to prostrate themselves before their All Highest, or in how complex a system of hyphenated prefixes they might struggle to express the fine shades of their noble rank. Still less can we desire to intensify that subordination of the individual to the civic whole of which Germany beyond doubt has had too much rather than too little. It is their cast-iron "patriotism" which, more than any other cause which could be named, made possible their outrage upon the world. We would rather instil, if we could, that wholesome individual rebelliousness by which alone a collective purpose of brigandage may be effectively balked.

What we do mean, then, by a democratized Germany is a Germany in which public affairs shall no longer be made the tool of dynastic intrigue or military ambition. For this purpose we would see the great body of the people taking government into their own hands. For we trust, despite much appearance to the contrary, that they will prove far better than the oligarchs who have misled them. No mere depreciation of hereditary rank will be of the slightest use until there is an active and intelligent participation in *politics*, especially in the control of foreign policy, by the great mass of the citizens.

The three sorts of civic quality which have been distinguished above, and to which the same name has somehow been applied, are so far from mutually implying one another that each of them has often been found, and is still often found, in the absence of one or both of the others. A man may be vociferously resentful about caste but have little public spirit and less desire to take a hand in public business. The new countries have known many such men, hot in pursuit of a private fortune, and disdainfully avowing their disregard of "mere politics." A few generations ago the patriotism of merry England was warm in the breast of multitudes who were at the same time thoroughly obsequious to the duke and the baron, quite content to leave every public matter to such wise or unwise guidance. And today the militant British "Liberal" is often acquiescent in what he looks upon as the empty form of rank and very determined to maintain his individual

freedom against majorities not less than against kings, yet eager to interfere by every privilege which the constitution gives him for shaping national policy.

Moreover, the word "democratic" is so far from covering *all* that we seek in a sound social order that to each of the foregoing senses a special danger corresponds. The passion for equality is a constant menace to legitimate leadership and to wholesome direction by the expert. The Pilgrim in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* spoke of that horrible future when science should have produced an intellectual aristocracy; "for what despotism is so black as one which the mind cannot challenge?" And yet, if we were not just so enthusiastic in our belief that one man's opinion is as good as another's, the poor dupe of the patent medicine advertisement might not be so cruelly robbed and tortured in defiance of published advice against quackery by our medical associations. It has been well said that a plebiscite a hundred years ago would have forbidden the threshing-machine, the power loom, the spinning-jenny, perhaps even the steam engine, and that in England at an earlier date a wide franchise would have prevented the reform of the calendar, preserved the penal laws against dissenters, and restored the House of Stuart. We may, indeed, plume ourselves on the thought that since then the schoolmaster has been abroad. But there must always be a great gulf between the best thought and the average thought of any age. Nor can the activity of all the schoolmasters abolish it, any more than the hind legs of a stag can be trained to overtake the front ones. "We may say generally," wrote the pessimistic Sir Henry Maine, "that the gradual establishment of the masses in power is of the blackest omen for all legislation founded on scientific opinion, which requires tension of mind to understand it and self-denial to submit to it." The masses, thank God, have done much better than Maine expected. But we know what he meant. The present writer has seen, for example, many a passionate effort to diffuse belief in vaccination among those who still cling to their own ignorant judgment against it. Perhaps they prefer a democratic subjection to smallpox rather than immunity through a servile submissiveness to oligarchic science.

The danger of becoming over-democratic in the sense of coercing the individual will under a tyrant majority has been displayed to us on an appalling scale by the case of the German professors. That class above any other should have been pledged to truth, and not merely to truth when popular and victorious, but to truth when overborne by clamor and threatened by authority. But these men were brought up in an atmosphere where truth had to play into the hands of power. They lived where an academic teacher must at his peril say, on matters of state, no more and no less than was prescribed to him, where he must pretend an enthusiasm for national purposes that he might personally hate, where, in short, he was a mere literary propagandist for court and public on every subject which touched "patriotism." His academic future depended on his complaisance. This hiring and intimidating of the learned class, this poisoning of the stream at its very source, is a chief count in our indictment against the enemies of civilization. There they stood, those wretched German *Gelehrter*, issuing pamphlet after pamphlet to suit the mood of the Wilhelmstrasse, reinforcing the infamous unanimity of an uninstructed public with the still more infamous, because so dishonest, unanimity of the erudite and the able. Their best excuse is perhaps that of the trembling senators of Tiberius, that they were forced to "balance terror against mutual shame." The thoughtless folk among ourselves, who mock at "academic freedom," little know whose language they have borrowed, whence comes the seed they are trying to scatter, and what sort of fruit it has been proved likely to bear.

It is less needful to point out the risks of democracy in the third sense that we have distinguished, for they have been insisted on with tiresome iteration by every critic from Plato down to Lecky and Carlyle. How can the masses legislate for themselves when they understand their own good so poorly, when so few have the leisure that is needed for so complex a study as government, when the crowd is such a helpless prey to the demagogue and the "machine," when class passions are so readily exasperated, short views are so much easier than long ones, and sacrifice of immediate personal interest for remote social benefit is so difficult a demand upon the average man? To some of these objections democracy

has given such an answer in the ordeal of the war that we need not expect them to present themselves again with quite the old arrogance. We have proved how deep was the truth of John Stuart Mill's judgment fifty years ago: "There is a capacity of exertion and self-denial in the masses of mankind, which is never known but on the rare occasions on which it is appealed to in the name of some great idea or elevated sentiment." One thing, however, we are certain to hear again, that the vast and intricate field of foreign affairs cannot be "democratized" but that decisions there must be left to "those who know." Some men to whom this last phrase can, in the light of the world-war, be applied only with ironic facetiousness do not hesitate still to put forward the claims of that secret diplomacy which conducted the world to disaster. And, although they belong to an order that is vanishing, they will be made to vanish all the sooner if the real democrat will acknowledge the grain of truth in what they say, and will prepare himself with a democratic scheme that can turn the edge of their criticisms.

The prevailing definition of democracy is "government by the will of the people." It has the advantage of making the idea of *government* central, so that social equality, individual submissiveness, and a common interest in common affairs follow by way of inference. But it has the defect of including politics which can be called democratic only by a non-natural use of the word. Every government which holds its place, if we exclude mere military tyrannies, may be said to rest upon the will of the people. For any nation that chooses to act as a whole can at its pleasure remove rulers from their post. If it refrains from doing so, this must be because either from deliberate preference or from mere dislike of change it acquiesces in the wielding of authority by those in power. When Louis Napoleon made himself emperor it is very probable, indeed, that a plebiscite among the French would have approved the step. Would such a plebiscite have made Napoleon's government "democratic"? It was one of the quaint statements of Bismarck that the throne of the king of Prussia was broad based on a people's will. And it is by no means certain that a numerical majority would not have borne Bismarck out. Mr. Bertrand Russell has

told us that it would be undemocratic to depose the Hohenzollerns at the end of the war unless the German people expressed a wish for the change! The use of words in this way is enough to make one's head go round. Yet it is certainly true that whether we think of rule by king and parliament, or of rule by president and congress, or of rule by sultan and grand vizier, or of rule by a Manchu dynasty, it is the public which by its overt action or by its tacit approval is responsible for the *status quo*. Every people, as the old proverb says, has just that sort of government which it deserves. But surely not every people may be said to govern itself democratically.

Granted that the public is the ultimate king-maker, a sharp difference will still exist between that state in which the decisive voice of the public is provided with an acknowledged organ of expression and a state where no such organ is available. For in the one case popular action must needs be revolutionary; in the other it is constitutional. Having raised to power a certain group of rulers, you may either submit without criticism to whatever they choose to do, or you may watch them at every important turn to make sure that they continue to execute your will. And as a country cannot be governed by continual convulsions, the only method, if you mean to be masters in your own house, is to establish a convenient channel through which public opinion may be constantly brought to bear.

Let us put this negatively. There are two ways in which, with equal deadliness, the principle of democracy may be denied. It may be repudiated in form, or it may be nullified in practice. Formal repudiation has been exemplified by the Germans. They have had no genuine right of free speech and free assembly, no unfettered press, no power of removing the executive from office at the public will. Thus, however true it may be that the people are in the end the source of authority, they remain at crucial moments without real influence. But one can also suppose a state in which the channels of popular action are provided but are left unused in practice. Each man may be so absorbed in his individual fortunes that he neglects his share in guiding the common affairs. Everybody's business has become nobody's business. A handful of bureaucrats is allowed to work its will. That state

has the form of democracy but lacks its power, and he who is content with it is no democrat except in name.

Thus we must apply a twofold test. Mr. Asquith once said of the British House of Commons: "There is not a wave, there is scarcely even a ripple of public opinion which is not reflected in our debates." This means that the formal test is there answered in a high degree, and no doubt a similar statement could be made of Congress. But in each case there must *be* a genuine public opinion, not the opinion of a few newspapers or a few noisy agitators, but that of the people as a whole, informing itself on matters of state, and exerting itself this way or that as the social conscience may direct. No Englishman and no American will argue that either country has risen in this respect to the level at which we should aim. Judged so, there have been formal democracies which we should call morally autocratic and formal autocracies that were morally democratic. We need, then, a national self-consciousness, not in the sense of a Kiplingesque jingoism, but in the sense of a widespread resolve on the part of the common man to know what his rulers are doing in foreign policy, and *to know it before it has been unalterably done*. Our advance in this direction has been notable, as anyone can see who compares the thrashing out of the terms of peace today in the public forum with the method of the Holy Alliance or of the Congress of Berlin. But if secret diplomacy is discredited, and if the public is to play an altogether new part in world-statesmanship, how much is needed to make the change effectual and to secure that it shall be a benefit?

It is safe to say that the new régime will demand a tremendous reform of public education. Citizenship must no longer be a side aspect of our school teaching, a thing "referred to" on Fourth of July and Empire Days to the accompaniment of a flag, the recitation of war poetry by the senior class, and the performance of action songs by the primary division before a crowd of admiring parents. Nor must the teaching of citizenship be a mere systematic drilling in submissiveness to the powers that be. What we want is to make our children more fit than we have been, not simply to execute public policies but to determine them. How lamentable it is that such prolonged propaganda should have been needed in the United States, in Canada, in Great Britain, to make our people

know what militarism is, what German imperialism is, what rights are safeguarded in the public law of nations, why peace at any price is an ignoble ideal, where the limits must be set which mark off legitimate national spirit from inhuman national aggressiveness! We ought not to have required so many tons of pamphlets and so many months of popular lecturing before these elements of citizenship were adequately realized. If democracy is to be effective in ruling the world such delay must never be imposed upon our action again. It may be said that the school cannot impart such complicated ideas to an immature mind. It would be nearer the truth to say that the mind of an intelligent boy or girl has just the elasticity and the receptiveness that are absent in the average adult. Try to explain the heinousness of selling votes before the senior class in a public school, and you will meet with less dishonest casuistry than would be put forward by these children's parents. It is not less absurd to say that international morals cannot be taught to the young because of the complex thinking it involves than to suggest that Sunday schools must be a failure because the Athanasian Creed is so very metaphysical. We should of course have to change many things: qualification of teachers, type of curriculum, character of textbooks, and much more. But this is part of the burden and the challenge of a new time.

Again, the democratic citizen of the future must be educated not only for civic self-expression but for civic self-control. It is not more important that he should learn to fulfil the functions which belong to him than that he should learn to recognize what functions do *not* belong to him. The war has brought home to us in its own brutal fashion a new regard for science. Not very long ago the scientific expert was having an uphill fight for his due place in our British and American communities. And until his due place is conceded we must expect that the expert will be much rarer than he might be and should be. Take, for example, an election campaign which involves some serious issue regarding public health. Does the party agent on one side feel very greatly strengthened, or the party agent on the other very much discouraged, by an "overwhelming" manifesto of the medical profession? Such a document can, as a rule, be tremendously counteracted by artful propaganda, by appeals to

prejudice, by insinuation of personal designs on the part of the doctors, by a skilful use of such terms of reproach as "theorist" and "faddist." So far the very mildest eugenic proposals have made little headway. Most of us know cities in which a suggested law of compulsory vaccination would meet with a perfect tornado of resentment at the polls. We have allowed a sort of myth to grow up that the "practical" man must keep a watch upon the "dreamer," and that business experience, native common sense, are the great sources of wise legislation. But the myth has been pricked by the war. We have learned how unmanageable by mere common sense are the explosives that are made in a laboratory, the new mechanical designs of the aerial and marine engineer, nay even the expansive ideas conceived by men of literature and set afloat upon the world through the press. The power of dollars, of business aptitude, of "great executive ability," has been thrust into the background by the power of thought. If this has been the case even amid that clash of arms by which the voice of reason is supposed to be overborne, how much more should it be so when the world has to be reorganized not for war but for peace?

What we must set before ourselves then is the task of making our elective system far more productive than it has ever yet been of rulers who shall deserve our trust not merely by their uprightness but by their insight. The Herculean work before us must not be laid upon the very un-Herculean shoulders of such men as we have had. Thinking on a vast and world-transforming scale has to be done, and we have to choose those who will do a great deal of it *for* us. For, however much we may speak of mandates and plebiscites and referendums, we know that the more complex our affairs become the greater must be the responsibility for decisions that we cast upon our parliamentary representatives. The verdict at the polls is on an issue of principle; the details, often of immense difficulty and importance, must be settled by our delegates, and it is the quite sufficiently arduous task of the common voter to determine who those delegates shall be.

It is not by making democracy prevail in the sense of enthroning average opinion; it is rather by securing for average opinion the best possible enlightenment from the brain and will of the most competent, that the next great step forward shall have been taken.

Surely, then, one of the measures most clearly indicated for the improvement of our education is an organized advance in the subject of "political science" at our universities and colleges. This very term still sounds a little odd to the man in the street, who has been accustomed to think of politics and science in quite different moods of mind. But if our universities are to be a real center from which the light of knowledge will shine abroad, can we afford to neglect as we have done so immensely important a field as the problems of government? Will anyone contend that our seats of learning have contributed even a fraction of the help that might have been expected of them to make the common voter more intelligent in the use of the franchise? And can we conceive any other province which calls for "university extension" work more urgently? Yet a word must here be said about the danger which seems to dog such academic teaching in "politics." No malediction can be adequate upon those who seem to advise that we should herein take our model from Germany. What we seek to promote is political *science*. The first requisite of science is freedom, and the first essential in its professors is fearless independence of popular prejudice. To say this is by no means to question the need at the most extraordinary crisis of the Great War for exceptional restraint by the state on the expression of opinions dangerous to public safety. But the need and legitimacy of restraint at all times upon social teaching that is uncongenial to the teacher's milieu are being shamelessly proclaimed. In one college after another social science has thus been burlesqued. No scientific man can too strongly insist that the principle of unfettered investigation and uncensored publication shall at the earliest safe moment be restored. It touches the very life of a progressive democracy.

Those who would limit the teaching in government or in economics by the tone of prevalent opinion are the lineal descendants of those who interdicted Galileo from saying what he thought about the stars. Those who think that a heretical sociologist should "seek the endowment of his chair from those who agree with him" would have bidden Copernicus expect no further countenance until he loyally and democratically adhered to the view that the sun goes round the earth. It is just at this point that the strain upon

popular institutions has become most intense, and that those who understand the vital need for protecting unpopular sincerity are separating themselves from the charlatans who flatter the uninstructed and toot for profit among the vulgar. President Wilson's ringing denunciation of the mob violence that masquerades as patriotism should be taken to heart by every college trustee who is in danger of mistaking loyalty to his own ignorances for loyalty to the state, and by every college head who cannot distinguish between enthusiasm for the American flag and enthusiasm for increased salary from a board of regents. The manifold questions about property, about labor, about trusts, about trade, about national equipment, about eugenics, which must be settled in the coming time of peace, cannot be dealt with in that poisoned atmosphere of restraint with which not a few who should know better would seek to surround us. They fear, forsooth, that the simple may be misled, and the national will may be impeded! Theories that are false and tendencies that are retrograde will be exposed in due time in the only way in which they can ever be exposed with effect, not by persecution, but by frank and tolerant criticism. To bear such criticism when it is distasteful is just what democracy must learn. And to those who would dole out "truth" under precautions we must reply that truth has so far proved capable of looking after itself with little help or profit from their trembling solitudes.

If any ingenious devotee of words can prove that the educational requirements I have tried to indicate for the democracy of the future are all deducible from the meaning of that very elusive word itself, by all means let him do so. Others will think it preferable to attempt no such linguistic manipulations, but to speak rather of those checks and balances by which democracy is made safe. One thing in any case is clear, that he is no friend but rather an enemy of the democratic system who would see it established without those conditions under which alone it can yield its best. Nothing is easier than to demand it in those shrill tones of compliment to "the people" which the people love to hear. But the democrat who, as Lord Morley has well said, prefers using his mind to merely exercising his tongue on the people's behalf is their true servant for the future.